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UNV at 25 and 50 years: pivotal moments for volunteerism I will never forget

When I reflect on my 40 years of work with UNDP and UNV, I consider the years devoted to UNV the most rewarding ones. Reflecting on the many challenges, some personal sacrifices, and the joy I experienced while working at the UN, it is these years I will never forget.

In 1996, I was appointed by the UNDP Administrator as the new Director for the Arab States, Latin America and the Caribbean (ARLAC) section at UNV.

At that time, UNV was celebrating 25 years since its founding. It was also in the process of moving its headquarters from Geneva to Bonn – resulting in more than two-thirds of its staff reassigned to new functions.
Concurrently, a process for budget reductions and management changes was ongoing at UNDP and the UN General Assembly had mandated UNV to move forward with plans to coordinate and organize a worldwide celebration of the recent announcement of 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers (IYV). With no new financial resources authorized, UNV needed to mobilize funds from the outside.

Looking back, if I were to sum up the essence of UNVs mission in light of these challenges, I can only think to paraphrase a quote, attributed sometimes to Mark Twain and others to Jean Cocteau: “Not knowing it was impossible, they went there and did it!”

At the forefront, with unmatched energy, never-ending determination and as a source of inexhaustible inspiration was the late Sharon Capeling-Alakija. She had been recently appointed UNV’s Executive Coordinator, by the UN Secretary-General, the late Kofi Annan.

Sharon led a motivated, creative and talented team, among them her Deputy, Ad De Raad, who would later become UNV Executive Coordinator, following Sharon’s premature death.

Sharon and Ad combined their talent, humour and the required managerial and people skills to lead us, in face of many challenges, to overcome hurdles with excellence, brilliance and a special human touch.

Of UNVs many responsibilities and highlights, the excitement and hard work that went in to coordinating, planning, organizing and celebrating IYV 2001 led to it becoming known as the most popular and widely recognized UN international year ever celebrated.

The year 2001 received the full support of UN Member States and was celebrated in more than 180 countries across diverse cultures. It was crowned by an extensive exhibition of outcomes and results, which highlighted and documented volunteering and volunteerism in varied cultures.

The International Year of Volunteers showed how volunteerism is often expressed through genuine acts of human solidarity, pointing to forms of cooperation among people, around the globe, and in their daily actions, to advance sustainable human development in their communities.

Without the examples of day-to-day community work manifested in multiple forms, volunteerism for development would have otherwise remained invisible and never been sufficiently recognized, nor regarded as an essential form of national social capital.

In the four years prior, as facilitator, UNV had offered support to thousands of partners and volunteer organizations, promoters and their institutions in planning for and organizing IYV 2001 celebrations. In the process, we fostered active cooperation, permanent consultations and exchange knowledge (networking) among the billions of volunteers involved.

Such was the success of IYV 2001 that its results were reported by otherwise unknown and voiceless volunteer actors, who became first hand rapporteurs in the plenary of the UN General Assembly. For the first
time ever, volunteers and volunteerism took centre stage in the UN Economic and Social Council. Other high-level discussions materialized through UN committee deliberations, and global governments made policy decisions affecting volunteering and volunteers by most global governments.

A myriad of economic and social studies and new research was produced to understand the meaning and measure the impact of volunteer work, as well as to guide its further mobilization, promotion and integration into public policies. Acknowledgment testimonials of the work of volunteers were reported around the world. Such a wealth of data would later be translated into a first ever Volunteer World Data report published.

World leaders, queens, kings, celebrities and ordinary people from all walks of life became aware of the previously invisible work of volunteers.

“Millions of media reports recounted real human stories of the acts of true bravery and human solidarity performed by volunteers everywhere and everyday. Volunteers became seen and recognized, with their contributions properly accounted for.

Having overcome these and other challenges, the UNV team accelerated the growth of its programme and diversified its volunteer modalities of international and national UN Volunteer specialists. Even young University Volunteers were deployed to support national and community initiatives, taking up assignments ranging from the organization and verification of national electoral processes to following-up on peace agreement processes or acting as human rights or women’s issues observers. Many went on to strengthen the regular and special operations of the UN.

UNV also expanded new and innovative partnerships with non-governmental organizations, universities and even private sector partners, to launch novelty global initiatives, like the first global UN Online Volunteering service.

At the local and regional level, UNV’s development interventions, via the Special Voluntary Fund and other resources, were matched with financing from international partners. The new funding enabled thousands of national and international UN Volunteers to be recruited, trained and deployed. Their assignments had a specific focus on dimensions and recommendations that emerged from IYV, within the framework of the UN’s results-based frameworks.

UNV’s regional activities were to increasingly advocate, better integrate and quickly mobilize volunteers in support of national development actions. This we called the AIM approach, for advocate, integrate and mobilize.

To end this journey down the memory lane, thoughts about Sharon Capeling-Alakija, Ad de Raad and Miguel Bermeo-Estrella (former Director of Operations and Programmes), as well as of hundreds of other former colleagues, and our beloved UN Volunteers, come to my mind.

I want to honour them for their dedication and hard work for the causes, and in the spirit, of the UN charter. In particular, we must honour the memory of the UN Volunteer specialists we lost in action, the real heroes along these 50 years of UNV’s work for development and volunteering.

Alongside many other UNV collaborators who faced challenges of their own, I recall, once more, our dear Sharon Capeling-Alakija. She used to quote Margaret Mead when she intended to uplift us – her colleagues, UNV teams or volunteers – and reinvigorate in us the sense of purpose to work for UNV or volunteering, at
headquarters or in the field. It goes:

"Never doubt that a small group of caring and committed citizens can change the world; in fact, it’s the only thing that ever has."

This article was prepared with the kind assistance of Online Volunteer Helen Maccan.